

Inasmuch as the peace to be established is eternal, it is clear that this peace includes more than a temporary cessation of hostilities among nations. The cessation of warfare in itself does not bring about a desired condition of existence. There must be removed the cause of war, namely, human sin. When this cause of war is removed, then there can be true peace. For human sin to be removed, however, there must be a state of peace between God and man. Not only must man be at peace with God, but what is more important, God must be at peace with man. The enmity which had existed between God and man must be removed. It was human sin which had kept God at enmity with man. When that sin has been removed, then there can be peace, as the Apostle says, 'Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 5.1). (EJ Young, *Isaiah* I, 339-340).

True peace can come because the Child has been born. Jesus reassured his disciples before the cross, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (Jn 14.27). After the resurrection, he greeted his startled disciples with, "Peace be with you" (Lk. 24.36).

w The Prince of Peace warned his followers that they would not always be received peacefully, that in fact the message of peace would bring a measure of division in the community (Mt. 10). Why is this so?

w In the Beatitudes, Jesus taught that the "peacemakers" would be called the children of God (Mt. 5.9). How does that guide the ways in which we are to live out the Christian faith?

w How do we communicate the message about Jesus Christ to people anxious about increasing violence and fearful of the prospect of war?



Four studies on Christmas by Peter J Blackburn

3. Wonderful Counsellor...

The other day we received an email from our son John in Brisbane. It began with the words, "Behold I bring tidings of great joy, for unto us a son is born." Details such as date, place, time and weight followed and seven photographs were attached.

I did hear years ago – back in the days of telegrams – about a couple who wanted to telegram friends about the birth of their first child – a son. To save costs they simply wrote, "Isaiah 9.6."

We can understand that. It is like the traditional birth announcement – "SMITH, To John and Mary, a son..." But in Isaiah 9.6 we have something quite different – "to us a child is born, to us a son is given."

w Think for a moment about the birth of a child "to" human parents and about the statement in Isaiah 9.6 that "to us" a child is born. What is the comparison and what is the contrast?

An Age of Despair

Things had been going rather badly for the Kingdom of Judah, much worse than most people realised. The prophet could see clearly that danger and dark times lay ahead. What was the matter? It was not simply the military might of Assyria, but the nation's sin and disobedience towards God and their lack of trust in him.

Read: Isaiah 8.19-22.

And what about more-recent prophets? "Man now sees that the seeds of his ultimate dissolution are at the heart of his being. The *End of the Species* is in the marrow of our bones" (Teilhard de Chardin, 1953). "Today even the survival of humanity is a utopian hope" (Norman O. Brown, 1968). "Current indications are that the world is bent on going to hell in a hand cart, and that is probably what it will do" (Gordon Rattray Taylor, 1969). "You are the orphans of an age of no tomorrows" (Joan Baez). "The Titanic sails at dawn" (Bob Dylan).

Many years ago I saw a cartoon showing a quaintly-dressed religious crank walking along the footpath with his placard, "The End is at hand!" – his next step would be into an open manhole! With the change of times, it is no longer the religious cranks who say that!

Study 4. Jesus, Saviour. Matthew 1.21

w Is this as much an age of despair as that? How do we assess the gloom and hope of the present time?

Message of Hope

Read: Isaiah 9.1-7.

In the middle of God's judgment and their despair came the message of hope – a promise from God himself about something he would do. Doom and gloom are very real. But it is God's redeeming Love, rather than his judgment, that is his final word.

At God's right time, something decisive is going to happen – not just another political ripple in the course of history. This time a Child, a Son – “and he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

ō **Wonderful Counsellor** – a wonder or marvel of a counsellor, an extraordinary counsellor. This is the Messiah-King – “the government will be on his shoulders.” It is not that he will be fortunate enough to have a good counsellor – he himself will be the Wonderful Counsellor. He will speak as no other has spoken. People will gladly listen to his wise authority.

And when Jesus came – “the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (Mt. 7.28-29). The temple guards were sent to arrest Jesus but came back saying, “No one ever spoke the way this man does” (Jn 7.46). “Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words” (Lk. 19.47-48).

In Matthew we read five major sections of Jesus' teaching: the Sermon on the Mount (5-7), the mission discourse (9.35-10.42), the Kingdom parables (13.1-52), various sayings (18.1-35) and his teaching on the end-times (19.1-22.35) – some have likened it to Moses' five books of the Law.

John records major teaching in the upper room (13.1-16.33). It is in this context that Jesus says of the promised Holy Spirit, “If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you” (14.15-17).

w Jesus was the “Wonderful Counsellor”. What does this mean to us as we read the gospel story and relate to Jesus ourselves?

ō **Mighty God** (*El gibbor*). Some have wanted to see these words as a form of popular hyperbole, somewhat similar to the words of Jacob returning repentant to his brother Esau – “If I have found favour in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favourably” (Gen. 33.10). Others have thought of it as mere court flattery. That this cannot be the meaning is clear from the very next chapter – “A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God (*El gibbor*)” (10.21).

The *gibbor* is the man of valour, the hero fighting for his people. The *El gibbor* is the promised divine person capable of acting and achieving the divine will. In Is. 11, the Spirit of the Lord on the Messiah is, among other things, “the Spirit of counsel and of power (*geburah* – a related word)” (v. 2).

When we look at Jesus in the New Testament, we see a much more peaceable compliant person than some of the prophecies seem to suggest – except when he drove out the money-changers (Mt. 21.13) and when he confronted the hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees (ch. 23). But then we see him apparently defeated and nailed to a cross. Before those events he had told his disciples, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (Jn 16.33). On the cross he cried out, “It is finished!” (19.30 – accomplished, completed).

He lived here in humility, his glory veiled, but he was truly “the Mighty God” (note also Phil. 2.5-11).

ō The **Everlasting Father** never deserts his responsibilities, but always provides help and supplies the needs of his family. Psalm 103.13 reminds us, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.” Psalm 68.5 describes God, “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.” And in Isaiah 63.16, we read, “But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.”

We have thought of Jesus as “the Son” and may not have specifically thought of him in this role. The thought comes through in a number of different images, perhaps particularly in the figure of the Good Shepherd (Jn 10.11ff), in the closeness and care of his relationship to his disciples and in his promise to be with us always.

w “Mighty God... Everlasting Father...” How do these words help us in understanding who Jesus is and in relating to him in our Christian life?

ō **Prince of Peace** – the chief, ruler or captain of peace (*shalom* – wholeness, well-being, prosperity). It is not just that he is a peaceful prince – he is the only one in the final sense who can bring peace. One commentator has written,